

**Richard Sugg**

## **Shakespeare's Anatomies of Death**

There are many contenders for most famous or most iconic moment in Shakespeare's plays. Yet it is hard to think of any that are so peculiarly universal and transferable as those in *Hamlet*. People who have never read or seen a Shakespeare play can nonetheless recognise instantly the image of a young man in black, holding a skull. The same is true of Hamlet's third soliloquy. If a person can accurately quote just a single line from Shakespeare's drama, 'To be or not to be; that is the question', is by far the most likely choice. Again, both moments are not only transferable (the skull scene played as comic skit or parody; 'To shop or not to shop'; 'To drink or not to drink') but for many, the original scene or speech flashes through the parody with effortless speed and recognisability.

A rather different kind of duality applies to what is arguably the play's third most iconic moment: the death of Ophelia. For many of us, Gertrude's original description of this offstage drowning now takes second place to John Everett Millais's mid-nineteenth century painting (despite the fact that in the painting Ophelia is still alive). Jostling with Ophelia for third place, we have the ghost of Hamlet's murdered father. *Hamlet*, then, covers almost all of the major dramatic possibilities surrounding death. Of these, I will focus on the following in *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*: suicide; images and aestheticisation of death; and responses to bereavement.

Certain broad patterns span the different scenes in question. Perhaps most obviously, female deaths are primarily a matter of image, whilst male deaths or responses to death are more likely to involve ideas – about honour or reputation, or the nature of death itself. Working against this tendency to give focus, form, and shape, however, is an opposing force: a recurrent sense of the unknowable or unspeakable. In such moments, very often dramatised through male reactions to death, there is a refusal to conceptualise mortality, and in particular sudden, personal bereavement.

## **Suicide**

In *Hamlet*, we have a famous contemplation of suicide, and one actual suicide.

*Enter Hamlet*

To be, or not to be; that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And, by opposing, end them. To die, to sleep -  
No more, and by a sleep to say we end  
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to - 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep,  
To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil  
Must give us pause. There's the respect  
That makes calamity of so long life,  
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of disprized love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office, and the spurns  
That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,  
When he himself might his quietus make  
With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,  
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
But that the dread of something after death,  
The undiscovered country from whose bourn  
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of?  
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;  
And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
And enterprises of great pith and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry,  
And lose the name of action.--Soft you, now,

The fair Ophelia! - Nymph, in thy orisons  
Be all my sins remembered.<sup>1</sup>

...

**QUEEN GERTRUDE**

One woe doth tread upon another's heel,  
So fast they follow. Your sister's drowned, Laertes.

**LAERTES**

Drowned? O, where?

**QUEEN GERTRUDE**

There is a willow grows aslant a brook,  
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.  
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make  
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,  
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,  
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.  
There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds  
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke;  
When down her weedy trophies and herself  
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,  
And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;  
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,  
As one incapable of her own distress,  
Or like a creature native and indued  
Unto that element. But long it could not be  
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
To muddy death.

(4.7, 135-55)

These two passages raise three central questions: why do people kill themselves? why do some want to, but fail? and how do certain people kill themselves, or imagine doing so? In

his novel *Prater Violet*, Christopher Isherwood asked: ‘What makes you go on living? Why don’t you kill yourself? Why is all this bearable? What makes you bear it?’ before answering: ‘I supposed, vaguely, that it was a kind of balance, a complex of tensions. You did whatever was next on the list. A meal to be eaten. Chapter eleven to be written...’.<sup>2</sup>

This modern analysis may well look familiar to any present-day agnostics or atheists who have ever contemplated suicide: the complex of tensions – probably including family and friends – webs us tightly into the living world, pulling us back even at moments when life seems temporarily intolerable. This of course also matches Durkheim’s classic analysis of suicides, as people who lack sufficient connection to others and to society.<sup>3</sup> But this restraining web or complex is not what restrains Hamlet. By contrast, what he says about life (‘th’oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely...’) is part of his reason for *wanting* death.

A second thing which probably restrains many potential suicides is the strange power of human consciousness. ‘To be’ human is to refuse to accept that you and the world are actually separate, and separable, entities. Our consciousness depends on the world; but the world does not depend on our consciousness. Does this potential obliteration of the mind trouble the suicidal Hamlet? It seems to later, when he prepares to clasp and address that famous skull. Yet in his third soliloquy, it does not seem to be fear of losing his consciousness which tugs Hamlet back from the brink. When he talks about ‘the dread of something after death,/The undiscovered country...’ he implies that he is restrained, not by fear of mental and physical obliteration, but precisely by the fear of being preserved, mentally and physically (at least come the resurrection), in some kind of afterlife.

And when he concludes with ‘Thus conscience does make cowards of us all’, he is almost certainly using ‘conscience’ to mean both ethical or Christian conscience and ‘consciousness’. Part of what stops Hamlet from thrusting the bare bodkin is thinking too much about his thoughts in the afterlife. He had begun, after all, by trying to lullaby himself to death:

To die, to sleep -

No more...

...

To die, to sleep,

To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come

From the hard dental to the murmurous sibilant, the sliding rhythm drifts on until the sleeper is woken with a jolt by those dreams which imply thought. To fully understand this ‘rude awakening’ of the slumbrous dead we need to know something about the strange interval between one person’s death and the general resurrection in Shakespeare’s time. For many members of his original audiences, these lines prompted unresolved questions. Were the dead actually *conscious* in the time prior to the general resurrection? Hamlet seems to hope not, but is unsure. Donne, by contrast, often seemed to wish to retain his consciousness, but to simultaneously fear the limbo of disembodied, disconnected thought.

Such uncertainties remind us that ‘sleep’, around four hundred years ago, was rarely the woolly euphemism of Victorian gravestones. Rather, it could mean quite precisely that the *soul* slept until the general resurrection. For some Christians, it was literally unconscious, dormant, and thoughtless, until it was re-embodied. This belief was either part of, or at least closely associated with, the doctrine known as mortalism. Although nominally heretics, all mortalists were Christians (and included both Luther and Milton in their ranks). The most radical mortalists held that the soul was permanently annihilated at death; less extreme ones, that it died but was restored at the resurrection; and the ‘soul sleepers’ that it snoozed in a state of blissful (and presumably dreamless) unconsciousness until the Day of Judgement.<sup>4</sup>

How does Ophelia’s actual suicide compare to these dark musings? If Hamlet thinks too much to die, Ophelia feels too much to live. Packed to bursting point with feelings she cannot fully express or realise (in the sense of a consummated sexual love), she first dissolves into the musical realm of song, before lullabying herself to death in the willowy brook. This fluid dissolution of both language and self reminds us of the strange ambiguity enfolding Ophelia’s end. Does she kill herself or not? It perhaps seems more accurate to say that she merely fails to let herself live. She had allegedly fallen into the brook by accident when a small branch broke, rather than deliberately filling her pockets with stones and immediately thrusting her head underwater.

Ironically, then, Hamlet seems more active in what he merely talks about, than Ophelia in what she does (or fails to do). Even when imagining, he is ready to ‘take arms against a sea of troubles’, and to enact the plosive double thrust of the ‘bare bodkin’. As so often, John Berger’s pithy summary of traditional gender roles applies here: ‘Men *act* and women *appear*’.<sup>5</sup> Despite being, for much of the play, one of the least active of Shakespeare’s protagonists, Hamlet is at least relatively vigorous by comparison with the oppressed and paralysed Ophelia. One of his greatest moments is highly verbal, whilst hers

(even before Millais) is intensely visual. To this we can add one more famous gender distinction: the fact that female suicide is typically achieved by poison or drowning, in a kind of fluid, passive blurring of life into death; whilst male suicides are more likely to die in one violent, more or less definite moment, by gunshot, stabbing, hanging or fatal plunge.<sup>6</sup> When Hamlet finally does die, it is in action and in pursuit of active aims; unlike Ophelia, who does indeed seem to drift softly down into the water, ‘like a creature native and indued/Unto that element’. It is not just, in fact, that we cannot easily say when she dies; but also that, visualising this in whatever form we might, we cannot easily say where the female ends and nature begins.

This vision clearly appealed to Millais, and despite the painting’s initially mixed reception, his rendering ultimately became the patent Ophelia. As implied above, the particular mode of Ophelia’s death seems to follow the internally consistent psychology of her oppression, marginalisation, and madness. But from another angle, this famous death by water looks distinctly odd. After all, Gertrude must be describing what she *saw*. She could have inferred most details after the event; but to know that Ophelia was singing, she had to be there – standing on the bank, and doing nothing to help. This point is important, because its dramatic implausibility suggests that the vision also appealed to Shakespeare. He *wanted* us to see it, despite the tricky questions this might raise about Gertrude’s watching passivity.

Toward the close of *Macbeth*, hearing that ‘the Queen, my lord, is dead’ (5.5, 15), audiences coming to the play first time around would not know about her alleged suicide. For this they had to wait until the very final speech, alluding to

... this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen,  
Who, as 'tis thought, by self and violent hands  
Took off her life;

(5.11, 35-7)

And so, if there is any space or breath for reflection on Lady Macbeth’s end as the heat and noise of battle explodes in act five, scene seven, viewers might in this interval have some sense of that great anti-heroine as merely fading to a natural close, through madness and the intermediate space of her sleepwalkings. Even as the curtain drops, we are not certain that she committed suicide, nor how she achieved it. For all that, it seems fair to add that the death of

this anti-icon could hardly have been allowed the kind of aestheticisation given to Ophelia, Juliet, or Desdemona.

Turning to Cleopatra, we find a female suicide which partly matches the death of Ophelia, but also strongly contrasts. Shakespeare's Cleopatra is the epitome of glittering image. (Let us not forget that the Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor film of the play remains, allowing for inflation, the most expensive screen production of all time.<sup>7</sup>) And she is also the epitome of feminine fluidity. Enobarbus' famous description of Cleopatra places her on water, and images of fluid change dominate a tragedy in which Antony is seen to lose his hard Roman outline as he sinks into the sensuous currents of Egypt. The pithily balanced, 'Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch/Of the ranged empire fall' (1.1, 35-6) is only the most obvious glance at this erotic and exotic undermining of Roman male honour.

It is perhaps no accident, then, that Antony botches his attempted Roman death, being forced to appeal vainly to several bystanders to end him. Briefly outliving him, Cleopatra dies with a perfectly well-preserved sense of her spectacular powers. Horrified at the notion that she might otherwise be bundled into an undignified spectacle of someone else's power (namely, Caesar's triumphal procession) she stages her own death with great artistry and control. And yet, whilst she is accorded vastly greater agency than Ophelia or Lady Macbeth, her end is again notably feminised. Her death (with asp at her breast) is a dramatic spectacle, and has left a potent visual spectacle: one as likely to come to mind at the name 'Cleopatra' as does Yorick's skull at the mention of 'Hamlet'. Not only that, but her final words do not publicly commend her deeds or honour to posterity in the way of dying male heroes. Instead, she again lullabies herself to death: first with the almost darkly comic: 'Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,/That sucks the nurse asleep?' and then with the warm drift of: 'As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle', before breathing, 'O Antony!' (5.2, 303-4, 306) one last time. It is also worth reminding ourselves that Cleopatra went to some trouble to achieve an eminently smooth and painless death:

... for her physician tells me

She hath pursued conclusions infinite

Of easy ways to die

(5.2, 348-50)

remarks Caesar in the play's final lines.

Like Cleopatra, Juliet achieves a good measure of efficient control over her death, stabbing herself decisively when she suspects that poisoned lips may not be enough to overcome her. Here the contrast with the poisoned Romeo is notable, but not especially strong. What is more interesting is the repeated desire to conjure an image of sensuously feminised death:

... O my love, my wife!  
Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath,  
Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty.  
Thou art not conquered. Beauty's ensign yet  
Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks,  
And death's pale flag is not advanced there.  
...  
... Ah, dear Juliet,  
Why art thou yet so fair? shall I believe  
That unsubstantial death is amorous,  
And that the lean abhorred monster keeps  
Thee here in dark to be his paramour?

(5.3, 91-105)

It would probably be going too far to say that Romeo secretly envies the necrophiliac pleasures which he conjures here. But this speech again shows us how Shakespeare's women often slide uncertainly across the line between life and death. And, as they do so, they retain a kind of aesthetic completeness. Seemingly breathless as she may be in Romeo's eyes, Juliet can be granted an eerie life just because her most essentially female quality – her beauty – remains intact. For Romeo, and for some early modern male viewers, this conveniently idealised, unblemished simulacrum may well have been more attractive than a living woman, far too likely to interfere with or disappoint one's ideals.

Similar qualities apply to Desdemona, in the final moments before Othello smothers her. As he leans over her sleeping form in the hushed candlelit intimacy of act five, scene two, the Moor delivers a speech which is at once dramatically realistic in its staccato indecision, and all too familiar in its fusion of love, death, and femininity:



*Enter OTHELLO*

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul.  
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars.  
It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood,  
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,  
And smooth as monumental alabaster.  
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.  
Put out the light, and then put out the light.  
If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,  
I can again thy former light restore  
Should I repent me; but once put out thy light,  
Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,  
I know not where is that Promethean heat  
That can thy light relume. When I have pluck'd the rose,  
I cannot give it vital growth again.  
It must needs wither: I'll smell thee on the tree.  
[*He kisses her*]  
O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade  
Justice to break her sword! One more, one more.  
Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee  
And love thee after. One more, and that's the last.  
*He kisses her*

(5.2, 1-19)

Most arresting here, at first glance, is the sense that for Othello his sleeping wife is already dead. Her skin has both the chill of snow (as opposed to, say, milk) and the unyielding immobility of a statue which, in the circumstances, can plausibly be imagined as a tomb monument. Yet after this, Othello enacts a peculiarly ironic and godlike reversal of what he is about to do. Probably leaning down more closely as his lines progress, he first gives this cold statue the heat and light of flame (very often, in this period, synonymous with the soul) before moving through the typically feminised life of the rose, the sensualised evocation of Desdemona's smell, and then kisses which could well be seen as a miniature parody of the enlivening breath of God himself. We might indeed extend this parallel by reminding

ourselves of how that newly animated creature then takes on a thankless and unpredictable life of its own: the previously silent and idealised Desdemona now arguing against Othello's mistaken beliefs, until her unwelcome voice is quite literally smothered out of existence.

Turning from the realm of female suicide and the aesthetics of feminine death, we have one final image of male self-cancellation from Othello himself:

Soft you; a word or two before you go.  
I have done the state some service, and they know't.  
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,  
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,  
Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak  
Of one that loved not wisely but too well,  
Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought,  
Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,  
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away  
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,  
Albeit unused to the melting mood,  
Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
Their medicinal gum. Set you down this,  
And say besides that in Aleppo once,  
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk  
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,  
And smote him thus.

*He stabs himself*

(5.2, 347-65)

Having realised the folly of his supposedly 'honourable murder' (5.2, 300) Othello now offers a typically articulate version of himself for the living to disseminate after his death. The self-portrait, for all its lingering exoticisation ('Indian pearl', 'Arabian trees') is in many ways well rounded. It evokes the military public service which arguably made Othello an

honorary Christian, via his battles against the heathen Turks, and balances this with his self-criticism and genuine grief. Yet in its final words it shifts into paradox. In Syrian Aleppo, notably farther east than Cyprus, the Christianised Othello should indeed have been an especially valuable defence against Turkish malice or insolence. But as he recollects this incident, he also strangely skews it by his partial re-enactment. The thrust which killed the Turk now kills himself. Relatively positive as the tragedy is about Othello's race, we seem here to meet a suicide which is motivated by more than just the hero's personal agonies. It is hard to confidently gloss this densely entangled mesh of the valorised past and ruined present. One reading, though, would be that Othello's final blow actually cancels his past achievements in defence of Christendom, implying by association that such a figure had ultimately crossed too many boundaries to survive intact in the militant world of early modern Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

## **Bereavement**

In Shakespeare's tragedies responses to bereavement span a broad range.<sup>9</sup> My chief interest, however, is in the tragedies' implicit debate about the 'correct' response to bereavement. The most famous example of this debate is found in the first onstage encounter between Hamlet and Claudius. Following Gertrude's lines about the common inevitability of death, her son replies:

Ay, madam, it is common.

**QUEEN GERTRUDE**

If it be,

Why seems it so particular with thee?

**HAMLET**

Seems, madam? Nay, it *is*. I know not 'seems'.

'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good-mother,

Nor customary suits of solemn black,

Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,

No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,

Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,

Together with all forms, moods, shows of grief

That can denote me truly. These indeed 'seem',

For they are actions that a man might play;  
But I have that within which passeth show -  
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

**CLAUDIUS**

'Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,  
To give these mourning duties to your father;  
But you must know your father lost a father;  
That father lost, lost his; and the survivor bound  
In filial obligation for some term  
To do obsequious sorrow. But to persevere  
In obstinate condolement is a course  
Of impious stubbornness, 'tis unmanly grief,  
It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,  
A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,  
An understanding simple and unschooled;  
...  
Fie, 'tis a fault to heaven,  
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,  
To reason most absurd, whose common theme  
Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried,  
From the first corse till he that died to-day,  
'This must be so'.

(1.2, 68-105)

For modern audiences, Claudius here is very likely to establish himself at once as a glib, oily and disingenuous villain. Not only he is obviously insincere about a death which he himself caused, but he stoops even to humiliating public insults about the bereaved son's 'simple' nature and 'unmanly grief'. If this modern response is in many ways understandable, it nevertheless blinds us to how that scene may have been received circa 1601. First: Hamlet does not at this stage suspect Claudius as murderer, and nor would first-time audiences necessarily do so. Secondly: both Gertrude and Hamlet evoke the stability of the state of Denmark ('look like a friend on Denmark'; 'You are the most immediate to our throne'). Even Claudius' request that Hamlet should 'think of us/As of a father' could easily be heard

as a strategic political plea, far more concerned with monarchical succession than with personal family harmony. This dimension of the scene would have made good sense to any politically astute or worldly viewer of the early modern era – and especially to Elizabethans, who, circa 1601, might reasonably expect the death of their childless queen at any time. That kind of attitude also needs to be meshed with questions of drama and performance. For a dramatist such as Shakespeare, a flatly villainous Claudius would be far too dull. If there is to be some real dramatic tension, his speech needs to have at least some edge of genuine persuasion to it.

Thirdly, we have Hamlet's response to Gertrude. Just what *is* he saying? Again, our post-Romantic ears might easily jump to the conclusion that he simply opposes surface ritual and outward expressions of grief to its deeper, more genuine, finally ineffable feeling. But the speech is too enigmatic to be easily and finally taken in that sense. Hamlet may have something within which passeth show, or he may just be good at persuading us to believe in it, spinning round a hollow centre his supple nets of words. Even assuming that he *does* have this something within him, there is good reason to think that he himself does not know what it is.

The fourth point is focussed most sharply in Claudius'

... Fie, 'tis a fault to heaven,  
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,  
To reason most absurd,

In Shakespeare's time, it could indeed seem a fault to nature or reason to very strongly resent death: born during a Stratford plague, the Bard himself may well have only narrowly survived the recurrent scourge that, in 1592-3, carried off around 20,000 Londoners.<sup>10</sup> It was also a fault against the dead to lament them very greatly, given that their real and full life had now truly begun. As Donne put it in 1612,

... this to thy soul allow,  
Think thy shell broke, think thy soul hatched but now.<sup>11</sup>

This not only echoed a conceit from Sir John Davies' immensely popular poem, *Nosce Teipsum*, but occurred in an elegy for a girl who had died just two years before, at the age of fourteen.<sup>12</sup> And if that should not seem close enough to Donne's own heart, we might hear

him, in 1616, warning his mother against that 'fault to heaven' which Claudius sees in Hamlet:

I hope, therefore, my most dear mother, that your experience of the calamities of this life ... your wisdom to distinguish the value of this world from the next, and your religious fear of offending our merciful God by repining at anything which He doeth, will preserve you from any inordinate and dangerous sorrow for the loss of my most beloved sister.<sup>13</sup>

This referred to Anne, Donne's sister by blood, and the bereavement meant that he was now the sole child of his surprisingly long-lived mother. Such sentiments were probably not atypical: they were, rather, the natural response to losses which were all overseen and ordained by an omnipotent, omniscient, and somehow beneficent God.<sup>14</sup>

We know enough about Donne to know that he was less unfeeling than many of his peers. And what we know of the French thinker Michel de Montaigne also suggests that he was hardly callous. For all that, Montaigne could vaguely remark, 'I have lost two or three children'.<sup>15</sup> Whilst we know far less about Shakespeare, it has been plausibly claimed that the death of his son, Hamnet, aged just eleven, had a powerful effect on him, and may indeed have coloured or shaped some of his evocations of grief after August 1596.<sup>16</sup>

This brings us to the other, more emotional, side of the debate. How do tragic characters respond to the first news of personal bereavement? At times, they can seem yet more unfeeling than Donne, Montaigne, or the duplicitous Danish king. Consider Siward, in the midst of battle against the forces of Macbeth:

#### **ROSS**

Your son, my lord, has paid a soldier's debt.  
He only lived but till he was a man,  
The which no sooner had his prowess confirmed  
In the unshrinking station where he fought,  
But like a man he died.

#### **SIWARD**

Then he is dead?

#### **ROSS**

Ay, and brought off the field. Your cause of sorrow  
Must not be measured by his worth, for then  
It hath no end.

**SIWARD**

Had he his hurts before?

**ROSS**

Ay, on the front.

**SIWARD**

Why then, God's soldier be he.  
Had I as many sons as I have hairs  
I would not wish them to a fairer death;  
And so, his knell is knoll'd.

**MALCOLM**

He's worth more sorrow,  
And that I'll spend for him.

**SIWARD**

He's worth no more.  
They say he parted well, and paid his score,  
And so, God be with him. Here comes newer comfort.

(5.11, 5-19)

At first glance or hearing, Siward's second question is so peculiarly coded to the norms of early modern male honour that it is probably incomprehensible to many of us. Following lines make us realise that 'before' indeed means, as Ross confirms, 'on the front'. Satisfied, now, that his son died fighting, not fleeing, Siward more or less rejoices. By way of comparison, it is worth trying to recall a modern war film in which a soldier responds in any similar way to the death of a comrade or friend, let alone close relative. Admittedly, Malcolm's 'he's worth more sorrow' at least invites audience members to take sides here. But there is little space for reflection, given that seconds later one death cancels another - the 'newer comfort' being, of course, Macbeth's severed (and probably dripping) head.

Immediate reactions to Ophelia's death come a little closer to modern notions of grief.

**LAERTES**

Alas, then, she is drowned?

## QUEEN GERTRUDE

Drowned, drowned.

## LAERTES

Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia,  
And therefore I forbid my tears. But yet  
It is our trick; nature her custom holds,  
Let shame say what it will.

*He weeps*

When these are gone,  
The woman will be out. Adieu, my lord.  
I have a speech of fire that fain would blaze,  
But that this folly douts it.<sup>17</sup>

First, we have the realistic impression of shock, with the stupefied Laertes repeating a question which Gertrude has answered at some length; whilst the Queen herself could also deliver the double knell of 'Drowned, drowned' in a state of numb automatism, as one who is trying to make the impossible word sink in. Next, when Laertes sheds tears for his sister, there is a sense of genuine inner feeling breaking out, despite the period's rules about male behaviour. This kind of spontaneous reaction is repeated in act five, when Laertes leaps into Ophelia's open grave, proposing to clasp her body once more (and, in some productions, actually doing so). But it is also notable that Laertes quite quickly goes on to transform his grief into far more typical male aggression, when grappling violently with the supposedly culpable Hamlet a few seconds later. Moving out a little further, we have the more general frame of Christian orthodoxy, which sternly refuses the alleged suicide full rites of burial.

In two other famous cases of tragic loss, violent emotion calls for plain language. First, we have Macduff. Seemingly fated to be the chief bringer of bad news, Ross tells him:

Your castle is surprised, your wife and babes  
Savagely slaughtered. To relate the manner  
Were on the quarry of these murdered deer  
To add the death of you.

Macduff's immediate response is eminently dramatic, needing to be staged for full effect; readers, by contrast, can gauge it only from Malcolm's succeeding



Merciful heaven!

(*To Macduff*) What, man, ne'er pull your hat upon your brows.

Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak

Whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break ,

alerting them to the fact that Macduff is temporarily speechless.

**MACDUFF**

My children too?

**ROSS**

Wife, children, servants, all

That could be found.

**MACDUFF**

And I must be from thence!

My wife killed too?

**ROSS**

I have said.

**MALCOLM**

Be comforted.

Let's make us medicines of our great revenge

To cure this deadly grief.

**MACDUFF**

He has no children. All my pretty ones?

Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?

What, all my pretty chickens and their dam

At one fell swoop?

**MALCOLM**

Dispute it like a man.

**MACDUFF**

I shall do so,

But I must also feel it as a man.

I cannot but remember such things were,

That were most precious to me.

(4.3, 205-225)

Aside from the repeated evocation of someone stunned, stranded between their well-established past and their inconceivable present ('My wife killed too? ... Did you say all?'), the most powerful evidence of grief comes from those poignant phrases, 'my pretty ones', and 'my pretty chickens'. These feminine terms are strikingly unlike the public speech of early modern men. Given that it would seem improbable for Macduff to suddenly coin them on the spur of the moment, we must assume either that he borrows them from the mouth of his dead wife, or that he now publicly uses terms he had once used only in the intimate and private spaces of his family.

But this is as much private, spontaneous emotion as can be allowed for the loss of all Macduff's young children and his wife. Having asked, 'Did heaven look on/And would not take their part?', he immediately regains control of his Christian identity, rebuking himself in a way that broadly recalls both Claudius and the bereaved Donne:

... Sinful Macduff,  
They were all struck for thee. Naught that I am,  
Not for their own demerits but for mine  
Fell slaughter on their souls. Heaven rest them now.  
(4.3, 225-29)

For all that, the power of those plain and poignant words is confirmed, elsewhere in the play, by Macbeth's deviously staged response to the murder of Duncan. Having framed Duncan's servants for his murder, and slain them for convenience, Macbeth justifies this alleged violence to Macduff:

**MACBETH**

... Here lay Duncan,  
His silver skin laced with his golden blood,  
And his gashed stabs looked like a breach in nature  
For ruin's wasteful entrance; there the murderers,  
Steeped in the colours of their trade, their daggers  
Unmannerly breeched with gore: who could refrain,

That had a heart to love, and in that heart  
Courage to make 's love known?

(2.3, 106-18)

The line which rings most glaringly false here is, 'His silver skin laced with his golden blood'. The image is far too elevated, far too artificial for its context (even, indeed, for an age when 'artificial' was usually a positive term), a world away from the homely immediacy of Macduff's 'pretty chickens'.<sup>18</sup>

Turning to Lear, we find the now famous stage direction, *Enter King Lear, with Queen Cordelia in his arms, [followed by the Gentleman]*

Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones.  
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so  
That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever.  
I know when one is dead, and when one lives.  
She's dead as earth.  
*[He lays her down]*

Lend me a looking-glass.  
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,  
Why, then she lives.

(5.3, 232-37)

This is now so well known that it is, again, useful to try and imagine seeing it for the first time. In the Globe theatre circa 1607, Cordelia's fate remained unknown – or, indeed, perhaps tilted toward the happy ending of the earlier *True Chronicle History of King Leir*, which many viewers would have known. The question, accordingly, was which part of Lear's wildly oscillating speech one should believe. For a few moments, he at least believes the better part of it:

This feather stirs. She lives! If it be so,  
It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows  
That ever I have felt.

(5.3, 240-42)

As the scene continues, Lear occasionally falls silent for some moments, leaving an actor with some difficult decisions about how to behave until, finally, the thread of pathos spins to its finest limit and breaks:

And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life?  
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,  
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more.  
Never, never, never, never, never.  
[*To Kent*] Pray you, undo this button. Thank you, sir.  
Do you see this? Look on her. Look, her lips.  
Look there, look there! *He dies*<sup>19</sup>

That extraordinary central line reminds us that much of Shakespeare's best dramatic language fuses music with meaning. Like some startlingly unexpected and unrepeated phrase in a symphony or string quartet, that brutally plain trochaic line derives much of its force from the fact that it is so atypical (albeit anticipated, in part, by the similarly plain, 'Howl, howl, howl, howl!') And even circa 1607, long before his canonisation, Shakespeare's audiences must have been the more struck by such plainness, from a writer already known for his poetic artifice, dexterity, and seemingly effortless ability to coin words and mint phrases.

After such a primal crescendo, there is no other option but a sudden change of key. And so, with poignant realism, we shift to the homely 'Pray you, undo this button' – a different kind of plainness, and one which might almost seem to be delivered by a different speaker, were it not for the hint of the now intolerable emotional pressure that prompts the request.

In act five, scene five of *Macbeth*, the protagonist's response to his wife's death offers us a far more ambiguous and enigmatic elegy. Potentially forewarned by the initial 'cry of women' offstage, Macbeth first states:

I have almost forgot the taste of fears.

...

... I have supped full with horrors.  
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,  
Cannot once start me.

On Seyton's re-entry, he then asks:

Wherefore was that cry?

**SEYTON**

The Queen, my lord, is dead.

**MACBETH**

She should have died hereafter.

There would have been a time for such a word.

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day

To the last syllable of recorded time,

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools

The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,

And then is heard no more. It is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing.

(5.5, 9-27)

We seem, here, to be at the limits of human emotion, and at the limits of poetry. Macbeth's speech hovers between the flatness of indifference, and the flatness of someone whose very capacity for feeling has been all but exhausted. Certainly, there is no repeated question, as with Laertes or Macduff; nor the half-crazed denials of Lear. On the surface, there is no particular trace of Lady Macbeth after that brief, relatively impersonal 'she' – itself occurring in lines which could indeed suggest her death as something of an ill-planned inconvenience.

And yet, if Macbeth does use his wife's death as the cue for a generalised lament on mortality, he produces one of Shakespeare's finest poetic moments in the process. It begins with that strangely dislocating implication of a death that was not carefully booked into Macbeth's schedule (recall Samuel Beckett: 'death has not required us to keep a day free'),

and the seemingly no less strange reduction of death to ‘such a word’.<sup>20</sup> A *word* – not an event? As the speech winds us further into a disorienting labyrinth of past and present, personal and general (‘*our* yesterdays have lighted [*other*] fools the way to dusty death’) we hear this apparent attempt at linguistic control of death break down. ‘the last syllable of recorded time’ might at first imply a prewritten, divinely authored teleology (prompting us to wonder about the significance of *extra* syllables in certain of these lines, especially the numbing ‘Tomorrow, and tomorrow...’). But in those final lines the stage curtain is whipped back, and where we may have hoped to see a sage and controlling God in some ultimate platonic Library, we meet, instead,

a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

How trustworthy is our speaker as a guide to human life and death? We might well remind ourselves that those last lines are in part a sharply demystifying inversion of the earlier sense of prophetic, pre-written destiny. But at the same time, the speech sounds a little too much like the hard-won knowledge of the blinded Gloucester - ‘As flies to wanton boys, are we to th’ gods;/They kill us for their sport’ – to entirely write off as the desperate personal nihilism of one errant character (*Tragedy of King Lear*, 4.1, 37-8). Moreover, the extraordinary irreducibility of this speech alone takes it beyond the particular demands of one dramatic moment. Ultimately, glosses and interpretations falter hopelessly: the best we can say is that in listening we peer inside a human mind, as it in turn squints up and down the spiral stairway of past, future, and eternity, lighted by one frail and faltering candle.

Turning from this generalised meditation on life and death, I will close with a yet more famous one, in which the revolutions of past, present and future are also powerfully evoked. The graveyard scene of *Hamlet* is best known for the moment when the hero, told that a freshly unearthed skull ‘was Yorick’s skull, the King’s jester’, responds:

Let me see.

*He takes the skull*

Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio – a fellow of  
Infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me

On his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred

My imagination is! my gorge rises at it. Here hung  
Those lips that I have kissed I know  
not how oft. Where be your gibes now, your  
gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment,  
that were wont to set the table on a roar? ...

...

Now get you to my lady's chamber  
and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour  
she must come. Make her laugh at that.

(5.2, 176-90)

It is hard, finally, to say why this moment has become so iconic. It may have done so, in part, because it shows a freer attitude toward death and bodily decay than later periods would allow themselves. What this scene certainly can do is remind us why other iconic moments gained their enduring status. The reason was the language which flowed through them. Scenes of Titus serving up a cannibal pie, or of Macbeth's severed head failed to gain such status just because their language does not reach the kind of peaks we have seen in these pages.

Amongst Hamlet's deathly musings, the sheer ephemerality of the human body is one key element, as when, having thrown Yorick's skull down, he states:

Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander  
returneth into dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make  
loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted,  
might they not stop a beer-barrel?

Perhaps Donne had this in mind when, in a sermon preached some years later, he asked: 'who knows the revolutions of dust? Dust upon the King's high-way, and dust upon the King's

grave, are both, or neither, dust royal, and may change places; who knows the revolutions of dust?’<sup>21</sup>

But for both Donne and Shakespeare, there was something yet more chilling than the promiscuous revolutions of dust. What seems to have sobered them most of all was the loss of language. Hence Donne’s reflection that, just as ‘the ashes of an oak in the chimney, are no epitaph of that oak, to tell me how high or how large that was’, so ‘the dust of great persons’ graves is speechless too, it says nothing, it distinguishes nothing’; and his impressively macabre imagining of ‘that brain that produced means to becalm gusts at council tables, storms in parliaments, tempests in popular commotions, now produc[ing] nothing but swarms of worms, and no proclamation to disperse them’.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, as he watches the various skulls rudely tossed about by the gravedigger, Hamlet is moved to imagine how these may have once cradled the brains of a courtier and a lawyer – both now long speechless and wordless. Here is ‘fine revolution’ indeed: a deathly silence echoed when Hamlet laments Yorick’s lost ‘gibes ... songs’ and ‘flashes of merriment’. Almost in the same breath, the Prince seems to try and divide the surface changes of death from the more abstract loss of speech and language. For, though he holds a man’s skull, he yet warns some courtly lady that, ‘let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come’.

Nevertheless, if this seems to valorise the highest achievements of language as peculiarly male, Hamlet’s relation to that famous skull is also both personal and partly sensuous. He has, after all, seen two skulls cast out of the dirt before he troubles to pick up the third. And he does so precisely because he *knew* its sometime owner.<sup>23</sup> Not only that, but when he recalls having once kissed Yorick’s lips, his ‘gorge rises at it’. This strikingly immediate reaction to a dry skull suggests that, for a brief instant, he *is* kissing Yorick again – that he momentarily loses himself in a past which he has reanimated. It is just possible, then, that between Hamlet’s ruminations on vapoured speech, humbled dust, lost language and perished lips, we are invited to remould all of these into that peculiarly human, peculiarly dramatic, and once most frail of all entities: the personal speaking voice.

Ultimately, death in Shakespeare is a typically multiple play of forces in opposition. Much of the texture of a given scene depends on the demands of the particular play or particular characters. In the cases of Juliet, Ophelia and Desdemona, female deaths are figured with a kind of wholeness, and a fluidity, which suggest a desire to thereby bridge the divide between life and death. But the famous images which these women offer (along with, differently, Cleopatra) are countered by that recurrent sense of blankness, of the failure of



language in the face, especially, of bereavement. If anything adequate can be said in such cases, it must be said plainly – often through disjointed monosyllables or mere repetition. And it is in such cases, of course, that the speaking voice is all – this being that medium that shows, as much as says, in moments of crisis.

It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves, on this note, that centuries of arduous scholarship have given us no idea of what Shakespeare's own voice sounded like, for all the limitless ventriloquising he has left us.

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<sup>1</sup> *Hamlet*, 3.1, 58-92, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, general eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). Unless otherwise stated, all references to Shakespeare are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> *Prater Violet* (London: Vintage, 2012), 117.

<sup>3</sup> See: Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: a Study in Sociology*, ed. G. Simpson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951).

<sup>4</sup> See: Richard Sugg, *The Smoke of the Soul: Medicine, Physiology and Religion in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), 206-233.

<sup>5</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 47.

<sup>6</sup> See: Diane G. Denning, Yeates Conwell, Chris Cox, 'Method Choice, Intent, and Gender in Completed Suicide', *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behaviour* 30, no. 3 (2000): 282-88.

<sup>7</sup> *Cleopatra*, dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz (1963), cost \$60 million, 1960s valuation.

<sup>8</sup> E.A.J. Honigmann, arguing that 'Othello, stabbing himself, also identifies himself with the Turk' arguably plays up Othello's otherness at the expense of his 'mask-like' Christianity; by contrast his 'when we shall meet at compt...' (5.2.271) suggests a thoroughly internalised faith (*Othello*, ed. E.A.J. Honigmann (Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 22-3, 331).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the quasi-tribal revenge or rebalancing at the opening of *Titus Andronicus* (1.1, 96-156).

<sup>10</sup> See: Park Honan, *Shakespeare: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 15, 17-18.

<sup>11</sup> 'Of the Progress of the Soul', in: *John Donne: the Complete English Poems*, ed. A.J. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), 292.

<sup>12</sup> See: See: R.C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1970), 197-8; Sir John Davies, *Nosce Teipsum* (1599), 99.

<sup>13</sup> Edmund Gosse, *The Life and Letters of John Donne*, 2 vols (London: William Heinemann, 1899), II, 260-1, II, 89.

<sup>14</sup> Another example comes from Ben Jonson's 'On my first son', with its very clear sense that the death of the seven year old child was just and divinely fated (*Works* (1616), 780-1).

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 82.

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Holland, 'William Shakespeare', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

<sup>17</sup> *Hamlet*, 4.7, 183-91. I have here used Philip Edwards' edition, which gives Laertes' 'she is drowned' as question, not statement (*Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Philip Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)).

<sup>18</sup> Whilst it is true that, in the era of routine phlebothomy, different constituents or states of blood offered a wide colour spectrum (the surgeon John Browne, for example, talks of the 'chestnut' hue of coagulated blood (*Adenochoiradelogia* (1684), 116)) the opposition with 'silver' seems to rule out Shakespeare's 'golden' as an empirically realistic term.

<sup>19</sup> 5.3, 281-87. All quotations are from the Oxford *Tragedy of King Lear*.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues With Georges Duthuit* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1965), 17.

<sup>21</sup> *The Complete Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols (Berkeley and Los Angeles: California University Press, 1953- 62), III, 105-6.

<sup>22</sup> *Sermons*, IV, 333.

<sup>23</sup> This itself leads us to wonder how the gravedigger could ever identify the twenty three year old skull: our best guess must be via positioning, perhaps combined with professional obsessiveness.